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Cover Page Footnote

Vrunda Stampwala Sahay is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of California, Riverside. This article is based on a paper given at the Uses of Popular Culture Conference at the University of Rhode Island, Kingston.

Repulsive Pariah or Romantic Prince? Transforming Monstrosity in Bram Stoker's and Francis Ford Coppola's *Dracula*

Vrunda Stampwala Sahay

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We're not just afraid of predators, we're transfixed by them, prone to weave stories and fables and chatter endlessly about them, because fascination creates preparedness, and preparedness, survival. In a deeply tribal sense, we love our monsters. (E O Wilson, qtd in Benchley 7)

In his introduction to the collected essays, *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, Jeffrey J Cohen argues that “the monster is best understood as an embodiment of difference, a breaker of category, and a resistant Other known only through process and movement, never through dissection-table analysis” (10). Perhaps the best example of this notion of knowledge derived from observation of an animated entity fluctuating and transforming itself over time is Stoker's *Dracula*. Since its publication over one hundred years ago, this tale of a notorious vampire has been through countless re-interpretations which have created an otherness that embodies society's evolving fears about itself. As a result, *Dracula* is not just simply a monster, but rather a “technology of monstrosity” (Halberstam 88). One of the most important elements of this technology lies in society's simultaneous yearning for and fear of sexual desire. A consensus exists in modern scholarship that vampirism in *Dracula* both expresses and distorts an originally sexual energy. That distortion, the representation of desire within the guise of monstrosity, reveals a fundamental psychological ambivalence between fear and desire.

Then, if we are to consider literature and film as mirrors for a culture's belief systems while we maintain that monstrosity can be understood in a state of process, we can see a psychological and philosophical shift between the character of *Dracula* in Bram Stoker's 1897 novel and that of Francis Ford Coppola's 1992 film version. Certainly, what was Stoker's monstrous sexual predator for the late Victorian era becomes the fragmented, romanticized, and possibly redeemable Other for late twentieth-century sensibilities. Recently, *Dracula* has begun to receive serious critical attention from scholars who focus on late Victorian sexual, intellectual, and political tensions in this classic retelling of the vampire myth. If we take this notion into modernity and the rise of cinema, we find that many mainstream movies have gained cultural influence in that the identities and circumstances portrayed become part of popular culture. I would argue that both Stoker's and Coppola's versions of *Dracula* reflect the cultural fears or attitudes of their respective time periods where sexuality plays a powerful role in problematizing the relationship between love and carnal, violent desires that cannot be restrained.

I will first explore the ways in which Stoker's text plays upon Victorian anxieties concerning physical representation, identity, and morphology to construct an Otherness embodied in *Dracula* whose origins are unexplainable and whose evil is irredeemable. Then, I move forward almost a hundred years and claim that cultural attitudes towards Otherness have shifted in ways represented by Coppola's vision of *Dracula*. Twentieth-century culture embodies a sense of isolation and fragmentation that creates an individualism in which people see themselves as outsiders and often feel misunderstood by their society. Coppola exploits this sentiment in a film that tantalizes the viewer into a romance with *Dracula*, the ultimate outsider. Hence, the film version reveals the postmodern sensibility of *Dracula* himself as a fragmented, multi-dimensional man-beast who must

sexually prey upon Lucy as an expression of his monstrosity yet deeply loves Mina as an expression of his humanity. Moreover, popular notions of true love coupled with the concept of reincarnation serve to romanticize and humanize the Otherness of Dracula thereby dispelling much of the effects of his monstrosity. Whereas Stoker's Dracula is a thing to be abhorred, Coppola's Dracula is a man to be admired because he's a survivor.

During the 1890s when Stoker was planning and drafting *Dracula*, the ruling paradigm in the human sciences, in biology, psychology, and social theory, was concerned with the pathologies of natural selection -- what we might call Darwinism and its discontents -- particularly the fear of a slide back down the evolutionary chain (Glover 251). In fact, certain contemporary portraits of the degenerative condition were key referents for Stoker's description of the vampire. This degeneration threatens the security of respectable middle-class society, precisely the world of doctors, lawyers and teachers that is under siege in the novel (Glover 257). As Jonathan Harker begins his journey to Transylvania, he immediately imbibes the eastern landscape with Otherness and this marker then extends to his understanding of Dracula himself strictly based on his physical appearance. In his first journal, Harker notes with dramatic emphasis his passage from west to east into the "wildest and least known portions of Europe" filled with "peasants" and "barbarians," some of whom look like "some old Oriental band of brigands" who are however "very harmless and rather wanting in natural self-assertion" (Stoker 1-3). The Otherness that Harker constructs of the inhabitants of the Carpathians extends to Dracula himself as Harker provides a most unpleasant physical appearance.

His face was a strong -- a very strong -- aquiline, with high bridge of the thin nose and peculiarly arched nostrils; with lofty domed forehead, and hair growing scantily round the temples, but profusely elsewhere. His eyebrows were very massive, almost meeting over the nose, and with bushy hair that seemed to curl in its own profusion. The mouth so far as I could see it under the heavy moustache, was fixed and rather cruel looking, with peculiarly sharp white teeth; these protruded over the lips, whose remarkable ruddiness showed astonishing vitality in a man of his years.... Strange to say, there were hairs in the centre of his palm. The nails were long and fine, and cut to a sharp point. As the Count leaned over me and his hands touched me, I could not repress a shudder.... A horrible feeling of nausea came over me, which do what I would, I could not conceal. (17)

Harker's description of the Count resembles a hybrid of human and beast and certainly gives manifestation to the suspicions that humans can, indeed, degenerate lower on the evolutionary ladder. It is interesting to note that only those human beings who exist in the pre-modern world outside of western civilization appear to manifest this shocking quality. Hence, Stoker depicts Dracula as more creature than human being and certainly antithetical to the hairless, well groomed, and proper middle-class British gentleman that Harker represents. These physical differences immediately place Harker in a state of discomfort as he suspects that he has come to serve a barbarian.

Stoker then further problematizes the construction of Dracula by playing upon techniques of Victorian morphology, the science concerned with the problems of form, function and transformation in matter. In *The Imperial Archive: Knowledge and the Fantasy of Empire*, Thomas Richards states that "morphology put all beings on the same imperial family tree. In the heyday of Victorian morphology, there were no longer any singular beings in the universe other than those

which human beings created themselves; as in Mary Shelley's novel, the Victorian monster is made, not born" (45). Yet, Stoker disrupts this notion by creating Dracula as an organic entity that has no human maker and who Harker begins to suspect is timeless. The notion of immortality becomes a frightening possibility because while Dracula's physical description suggests his place on the evolutionary ladder as beneath human, his longevity suggests a being superior to the English gentleman. The Count nostalgically prides himself on his noble lineage of ancestors who trace back to Attila the Hun, who "fought for lordship" and who "were a conquering race" (25). Dracula defines his family through a series of battles and invasions and Harker notes that the Count "spoke as if he had been present at them all" (26). For Dracula, the imperial family tree proves irrelevant because he alone can persevere long after generations of humans have died. Unlike humans, Dracula has the power of creation through a different type of reproduction. He does not reproduce from birth, nor from artificial means, but transforms humans through death. In effect, Lucy's body dies, but she is reborn as an un-dead.

Yet, the reader is informed only of the Count's nobility, not of the origins of his vampirism other than Van Helsing's claim that his ancestors had "dealing with the Evil One" (200). While Van Helsing validates scientific reason, he does not underestimate the power of the supernatural. The English scientist's use of crucifix and holy wafer mediates ideological and cultural positions: "the occult does not oppose reason and progress here, reason and progress are absorbed by the occult" (Boone 81). Moreover, Stoker's narrative insinuates that their very reliance on scientific rationality makes the English vulnerable to Dracula's threat. The author's primary mouthpiece on this point is Van Helsing who argues that scientists lack an open mind since they believe that what "they can see and prove constitutes the whole of reality" (Stoker 274). Hence, Van Helsing is the only proponent of the modern world that understands the morphology at play:

He [Dracula] is brute, and more than brute;... he can, within limitations, appear at will when, and where, and in any of the forms that are to him; he can within his range; direct the elements: the storm, the fog, the thunder; he can command all the meaner things: the rat and the owl and the bat -- the moth, and the fox, and the wolf; he can grow and become small; and he can at times vanish and come unknown. (197)

Essentially, mutants are the height of monstrosity because they are capable of sudden and catastrophic changes in form. They were threats to the global claim of Darwinism, disrupting human order. As a result, institutional science is especially ineffectual in dealing with the supernatural. Harker becomes frustrated that "the old centuries had a power in Transylvania that even modernity cannot kill" (36). Vampirism transforms people into more bestial versions of themselves by erasing human identity and spreads like a disease, always threatening to undermine the culture that believes too uncritically in its progress (Boone 80). Hence, Stoker succeeds in creating a form of monstrosity that cannot be catalogued by science and is received by nineteenth-century audiences as an irredeemable Other whose motivations are purely evil.

As Harker spends more time with the Count, he begins to alter his negative views as his host reveals western sensibilities in his tremendous admiration for England and his hope to assimilate himself into British society: "Well I know that, did I move and speak in your London, none there are who would not know me for a stranger. That is not enough for me. Here I am noble; the common people know me, and I am master. But a stranger in a strange land, he is no one" (19). Through these words, Dracula both asserts his nobility and reveals his vulnerability as a

"stranger" from a pre-modern world who wishes to partake in the greatness of the west. Certainly, these words appease Harker for they pamper his sense of western superiority while veiling the vampire's inherent evil and baseness under the guise of nobility and family lineage. This leads us to the late Victorian anxieties about identity and the fear of the Other. According to H L Malchow, the typical gothic story of the late nineteenth century "revolves around the problem of confused, vulnerable, or secret identities, fear of exposure, evil masquerading as respectability, or respectability built upon a hidden corruption" (126). Deeply impressed by the vampire's business acumen, Harker proves quite taken with the Count and imagines that Dracula "would have made a wonderful solicitor." Little does Harker know that the Count's only purpose for coming to Great Britain is to instigate an act of "revenge" through reverse colonization. The "crowded streets of mighty England" (18) are filled with human blood donors that Dracula seeks to make into "my creatures, to do my bidding and to be my jackals when I want to feed" (255). Thus, under the guise of assimilation into the British Empire, the Count's true vision is a nation of blood donors and possible legions of vampires.

Moreover, if the earlier gothic was often occupied with the liberation of the physical self from the unjust imprisonment and degradation, stories in the late nineteenth century frequently revolve around the preservation of one's individual identity, the conscious self, from disintegrating internal conflict (Malchow 126). As Van Helsing points out, Dracula represents a new form of monstrosity that arises to outwit science, rationality, and Darwinism. When Dracula forces Harker to remain with him for a month, the young solicitor realizes his imprisonment with the "dread of this horrible place overpowering [me] and there is no escape" (Stoker 30). While the claustrophobia of the castle begins to diminish Harker's mental state, what pushes him to the brink of insanity are the manifestations of monstrosity which prove inexplicable by his rational intellect. Initially, by recording his experiences in the journal in a scientific manner even while experiencing the supernatural, Harker desperately seizes the fragments of his rationality: "Let me begin with facts-bare, meagre facts, verified by books and figures, and of which there can be no doubt. I must not confuse them with experiences which will have to rest on my own observation or my memory of them" (27).

Harker tries to understand, order, and control his experiences by relying on reason. When he sees Dracula crawling down the castle's steep walls "as a lizard," the internal conflict between the rational and the supernatural begins to disintegrate Harker's mind into tremendous turmoil and conflict. Furthermore, his encounter with the vampire sisters proves particularly disturbing because it surfaces the deep sexual desires that Harker must keep restrained as a well-mannered English gentleman. Jonathan feels in his "heart a wicked, burning desire that they would kiss me with those red lips" (33). So, immobilized by the competing imperatives of "wicked desire" and deadly fear," Harker awaits an erotic fulfillment that entails the dissolution of the boundaries of the self. Thus, his failure to accept these experiences on their own supernatural terms means that he cannot actively comprehend them, and instead they eventually transform Harker as his conscious self slips away in a surreal state whereby an illusive reality envelopes and ravages his identity.

Less than one hundred years after *Dracula* was published, in 1992, Francis Ford Coppola released his own film version of it entitled *Bram Stoker's Dracula*. Although much of the details of the original text was reproduced in visually stunning ways, Coppola transformed Dracula himself into a modern definition of Otherness by rendering a far more complex portrait of monstrosity than Stoker's initial vision. In the late twentieth century, monstrosity becomes acceptable in popular culture when there are reasons behind it that surpass the purely one-dimensional evil of Victorian texts. In effect, Coppola's postmodern vision delineates Dracula as a complex, multi-dimensional entity; a deeply emotional persona perched on the delicate boundary between man and beast, struggling between the incessantly carnal needs of the predator and the longing of an unrealized

and possibly redeeming love. Hence, utilizing the popular myths of true love and reinforcing it with “new age” beliefs in reincarnation, Coppola’s film represents Count Dracula as a redeemable soul whose humanized Otherness dispels much of his monstrosity.

According to Coppola, Dracula’s origins were not monstrous; he becomes evil after he is robbed of his wife and true love Elizabeta. Unlike Stoker, Coppola shows Dracula as a human being from the beginning. His Count is actually Vlad the Impaler, who leaves Elizabeta to fight in the crusades. Elizabeta commits suicide after reading a false note that Dracula has been killed in battle. When Dracula returns to find his beloved wife dead, he renounces Christianity and becomes the immortal, un-dead vampire. So, from the onset, Coppola constructs Dracula as a tragic anti-hero whose passionate nature and thirst for true love lead him to evil. Hence, Coppola’s Dracula dramatizes a romantic version of sexuality in his obsession for romantic love. Although he retains all aspects of Otherness that Stoker initially gave him, the audience senses Dracula’s humanity precisely because he is capable of feeling love. This results in a paradigmatic shift of the notions of monstrosity. While Dracula must still be destroyed for all the same reasons as before, the sentiment regarding his annihilation shifts from relief over the destruction of evil to sadness for a lost soul redeemed by his release from monstrosity. Hence, popular culture’s faith in the fantasy of true love and romantic passion results to a certain extent in the audience’s acceptance for and forgiveness of Dracula’s monstrosity.

Another popular cultural belief that Coppola relies upon to construct Dracula as a sympathetic character is that of reincarnation. This notion, the belief that souls are immortal and thus reborn into new bodies after they die, derives from eastern religious tradition and has always been considered anti-Christian. Certainly, such a notion was unacceptable amidst the morphology and Darwinism of the Victorian era. Yet, in the latter part of the twentieth century, the concept of reincarnation, usually labeled as a “new age” belief, has developed into a non-religious, popular cultural phenomenon. According to a sociological study of England published in 1999, survey data indicate a substantial minority of westerners with no attachment to Eastern or New Age religion who nevertheless believe in reincarnation:

Many of them hold reincarnation alongside Christian belief; Most are less than dogmatic about their belief and some entertain the possibility of reincarnation because of experience (first or second hand). For others reincarnation solves intellectual problems, e.g., concerning theodicy; in that they see bodily incarnations in the context of long term spiritual progress, and they value spirit over body. Their belief in reincarnation has rather little effect on the rest of their lives. It is concluded that rising belief in reincarnation heralds neither a spiritual nor a moral revolution, but fits easily into the privatized religion that characterizes contemporary western societies, and England in particular. (Walter 187)

Thus Coppola capitalizes on this aspect of popular culture to inform and change the original canonical text of *Dracula*. Mina is the reincarnation of Elizabeta in this film and Dracula travels to London not so much to colonize it for vampirism as to regain his lost love.

Coppola remains true to his postmodern take by countering Dracula’s relationship with Mina with that of his violence towards Lucy. Dracula must dispel his monstrosity and evil upon Lucy so that he might sustain and nourish his love for Mina. In Stoker’s original text, the representation of

women and sexuality can be traced back to Victorian anxieties regarding disease, infection, and cultural invasion:

The women represent potential for transformation; they are the place through which threats to cultural stability can enter. The metaphor of entry is a sexual one so that "Woman" must remain soul not body, a transcendent value not open to transformation- women must not become sexual. For the characters in the novel, sexual desire leads to and is mingled with horror. (Boone 83)

Coppola himself has stated that "vampires seduce us and take us to dark places and awaken us sexually in ways that are taboo" (Coppola and Hart 136). Moreover, vampirism is constructed in opposition to purity and righteousness, and thus as a threat to society. In the beginning of the film, Sadie Frost portrays Lucy as an overtly promiscuous woman who revels in the sexual conquest of her three suitors and to a certain extent influences Mina to become sexually adventurous. While Winona Ryder's Mina represents the purity, chastity, and propriety of the good Englishwoman, it is a state that she cannot fully sustain. In a sense, the women are inviting Dracula's seduction when they fantasize about sexual pleasures and eventually become his mistress and wife, the vessels in which he deposits both his violent and loving tendencies (Corbin 42).

In both Stoker and Coppola's visions, although more overtly in the latter, Mina and Lucy represent the complex forces at war in Dracula's soul. In the film, Dracula tortures Harker after he discovers Mina's photograph and recognizes her as Elizabeta. He comes to England and immediately victimizes the lustful Lucy whose aroused sexuality makes her an easy target. He ravages her in the form of a beast but is painfully ashamed when discovered in the act by Mina. In order to "protect" her, Dracula wills Mina to forget the violent sexuality she witnessed. Instead, he appears to her as an eastern prince and woos her with gentle, loving gestures. Yet, in order to satisfy the monster within, Dracula continually preys upon Lucy to unleash the raw carnality that defines much of his being. The violence toward Lucy increases as Dracula realizes that Mina will indeed marry Harker and he will lose her again. In fact, as they wed, Dracula fatally attacks Lucy in the form of a wolf thereby causing her "death" and subsequent rebirth as a vampire. Thus, in the twentieth century, even though Dracula may acquire emotions and the capacity to love, his monstrosity and propensity towards violent, evil acts cannot be obliterated. Instead of the one-dimensional evil of Stoker's novel, Coppola's Dracula is multi-faceted, tortured, and completely at odds with the jagged dichotomies that characterize his existence.

Furthermore, the Otherness constructed by Stoker in his original motive of re-colonization for the vampire's migration to England are overshadowed in Coppola's version by Mina's realization of her life as Elizabeta. Even though she initially pronounces herself as "unclean, unclean" (Stoker 247), Mina realizes her love for Dracula and seeks to embrace his otherness and become like him. Waking to find Dracula in her bed, Mina says, "I've wanted this to happen. I know that now. I want to be with you always." Even though she knows that he killed Lucy, Mina cannot stop loving Dracula. "I want to be what you are; see what you see; love what you love," she says. And Dracula discloses the requirements of his love: "To walk with me you must die to your present life and be reborn into mine." Mina accepts the conditions stating, "you are my love and my life always" to which Dracula responds, "then I give you life eternal, everlasting love, the power of the storm and the beasts of the earth. Walk with me to be my loving wife

forever." Yet, when Mina attempts to drink his blood, Dracula stops her saying, "I love you too much to condemn you." He must accept that a union with Mina cannot occur because of his existence as a being outside of human definition or understanding. So, even in Coppola's rather sympathetic version, monstrosity of Dracula's magnitude must be destroyed because of its overwhelming threat to humanity. Unlike Stoker's version where the vampire is mercilessly annihilated, Coppola offers the monster salvation through love. With Dracula's acceptance of failure comes a desire for release from his tortured immortality. After a loving goodbye, he asks Mina to behead him. Upon doing so, she beholds his former visage: a young, handsome, man with an innocent face and a peaceful expression in death. Thus, almost a century later, the monstrous Other who disgusts and repels becomes something to be accepted and loved regardless of its faults.

In *Dracula*, Stoker diligently and systematically combined all notions of otherness as defined in physical appearance and identity in order to present a horrific picture of monstrosity. Stoker probably never imagined that some day the otherness and monstrosity that was so rejected and feared by both the greatest intellects and popular masses of his era would come to be accepted; that less than a century later, popular culture may not only look past monstrosity, but relate to and glorify it in deeply psychological ways. Certainly, there is an identification with and respect for those who rebel against the status quo. Post-modernism reveals the fragmented realities of our existence and makes us acknowledge that there are multiple layers of complexities within each human being. We all have goodness and we also retain shades of darkness within us. The Dracula of the nineteenth century was a one-dimensional being whose motivations for evil were never quite clear. Yet, he became a cultural icon precisely because of the continuing love affair with predators and his longevity attests to the notion that, as Wilson contends, we truly do love our monsters. Stoker's creation has allowed us as a society to problematize and re-interpret the notion of monstrosity. In many ways, Francis Ford Coppola's *Dracula* enhances the vampire's exoticism and transcendence over time through the construction of internal complexity supported by popular notions of true love and reincarnation. As a result, a feared monster of the nineteenth century becomes a humanized, redeemable, and romantic man in the twentieth-century popular imagination.

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